

**SD Papers: 3**

# **After the Dominoes Fell**

by  
Carl Gershman

The University  
of Michigan  
Labadie Collection

**50¢**

Reprinted by  
**Social Democrats, USA**  
275 Seventh Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10001  
(212) 255-1390

# After the Dominoes Fell

Carl Gershman

IT is now almost three years since Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos fell to the Communists. During the war, so much attention was focused on the mistakes of U.S. policy and on the undemocratic practices of the governments we were supporting that a complacent attitude developed toward the consequences of a Communist victory for the people in Indochina. But the time has come to challenge that attitude. For we now know that the end of the war has not brought an end to the suffering of the people of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos but has increased it—in the case of Cambodia beyond even the worst expectations.

The southern half of Vietnam is a closed society now, off-limits to the Western press and most other observers from the non-Communist world. Amnesty International cannot inspect its jails, nor are delegations from similar watchdog organizations allowed in to have a look at the actual conditions of day-to-day life in the country. Still, the regime has been unable to keep the South completely sealed off, and a few non-Communist journalists who supported Hanoi during the war have been let in. One of them, Jean Lacouture, wrote after his visit that "it is better for someone trying to preserve intact his admiration for a revolution not to know its victims." Other information has also come from foreign observers who remained behind after the Communist victory, like the French Canadian Jesuit priest, André Gelin, as well as through clandestine letters smuggled out and received by Vietnamese communities in the United States and France.

The chief source of information, however, has been the Vietnamese refugees who arrive by boat in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries at the rate of about 1,500 per month, some carrying documents which bear upon conditions of life in Vietnam, others having only their own personal experiences to relate. Noam Chomsky, a sympathizer of the new regimes in Indochina, has written of "the extreme unreliability" of reports by Indochinese refugees who are "frightened and de-

fenseless" and have "a vested interest" in telling their Thai or Western interlocutors what is wrong with the Communist societies they have fled. But such cavalier dismissal of testimony from hundreds and even thousands of witnesses who come from different parts of the country and from different social backgrounds seems almost willfully perverse, particularly when these accounts have been corroborated under close questioning, when they have been carefully weighed and checked against information gathered from other sources, including official Communist statements, and when the government that stands indicted in these accounts has also abolished the minimal freedoms necessary to determine their accuracy. (Chomsky's skepticism, it should be added, is selective. He has no trouble believing a report by an American Friends Service Committee delegation to Vietnam describing the "impressive social and economic progress" made in Vietnam since the war.)

Moreover, it is not only what the refugees say about life in Vietnam that is significant, but also the very fact that they fled and the risks they took in doing so—they literally threw themselves upon the South China Sea in small coastal craft, knowing that they were more likely to be caught by the Vietnamese patrols or to perish at sea than to make it to safety. One of these "boat people," Nguyen Cong Hoan, who was an opponent of the Thieu government and then became a member of the National Assembly of the newly united Communist Vietnam before his escape in March 1977, explained the political significance of these hazardous escapes in testimony before a House Subcommittee in July:\*

... Our people have a traditional attachment to their country. No Vietnamese would willingly leave home, homeland, and ancestors' graves. During the most oppressive French colonial rule and Japanese domination no one escaped by boat at great risk to their lives. Yet you see that my countrymen by the thousands and from all walks of life, including a number of disillusioned Vietcongs, continue to escape from

Reprinted from *Commentary*, May 1978, by permission: copyright © 1978 by the American Jewish Committee.

CARL GERSHMAN is executive director of Social Democrats, USA. His most recent contribution to *COMMENTARY* (with Bayard Rustin) was "Africa, Soviet Imperialism & the Retreat of American Power" (October 1977).

\* Hearings before the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the House Committee on International Relations, July 26, 1977, pp. 145-67.

Vietnam; six out of ten never make it, and for those who are fortunate to make it, they are not allowed to land.

Yet still the refugees continue to flee, because, according to Nguyen Cong Hoan, both they and the compatriots they leave behind consider the new Communist government "the most inhuman and oppressive regime they have ever known." This view was further borne out in an interview published recently in the *New York Times*, of two refugees who had been the organizers of a boat escape for some forty-four people. When asked by the interviewer, Henry Kamm, how they had been able to avoid detection during their year-long preparations for flight, one of the refugees replied that there was little risk of being informed on since "everybody is against the government and most people would like to leave."

IT NOW appears that there was no "blood bath" in Vietnam after the Communist victory on the scale of the Hué massacre of 1968 (when several thousand civilians were executed during the brief period of Communist control of the city). This does not mean, however, that no executions have taken place. Nguyen Cong Hoan says that there were few executions in Saigon itself or other major cities, but many more in the provinces, where there was less danger of detection. In his own province of Phu Yen, which has a population of 300,000 (the total population of the south is about 20 million), Nguyen Cong Hoan estimates that there have been 700 executions, 500 immediately after the Communist takeover, mostly of police and civilian officials and political party members, and 200 during the following two years. He adds that Phu Yen is a "typical" province in this respect, but cautions that precise figures are difficult to come by, since families are afraid to protest or even to divulge such executions. All told, it seems probable that executions in South Vietnam have numbered in the tens of thousands.

A more common method of dealing with members of the old regime or other politically unreliable elements has been to ship them off to so-called reeducation camps. These are really concentration camps by another name, where prisoners are subjected to twelve hours a day of forced labor, as well as to daily indoctrination sessions about the sins of the U.S. and the Thieu regime. They are also required to produce confessions of past political error, and to compose painstakingly detailed and ideologically correct personal and family histories which are continually being written and rewritten. Conditions in these camps are reportedly abominable. Lacouture described one that he visited as a "prefabricated hell," while a *Le Monde* correspondent, Patrice de Beer, another former supporter of the National Liberation Front, talked about the "atmosphere of misery" in a sec-

ond camp. Former inmates report numerous deaths from malnutrition, exhaustion, malaria, and dysentery, as well as through suicides and the hand-detection of mines—a convenient way to dispose of recalcitrant prisoners. Journalist Theodore Jacquenay, who interviewed former prisoners, reports that "camp inmates commonly suffer from limb paralysis, vision loss, and infectious skin diseases like scabies caused by long-term, closely-packed, dark living conditions."

Just how many prisoners are presently in these camps is difficult to determine, since arrests are not made public and families are generally not even informed of the circumstances when a member disappears. Nor, needless to say, are there any trials. In 1976, one Vietnamese official said there were "more than 200,000" in the camps, while early in 1977 Vietnam's envoy to Paris said there were "at most some 50,000." The actual figures seem to be higher. Nguyen Cong Hoan, extrapolating from the 6,000 prisoners he knows to be held in Phu Yen (he visited three of the seven camps there), puts the total for the country at somewhere between 200,000 and 480,000. Lacouture thinks the figure may exceed 300,000, while Father Gelinas estimates there may be as many as 500,000 in the camps.

It seems very possible, therefore, that about one out of every sixty South Vietnamese is presently an inmate of the new Vietnam's own version of the Gulag Archipelago. These prisoners include not only military and civilian officials of the former government, but also political leaders who were against the Thieu regime, like the former leader of the opposition in South Vietnam's National Assembly, Tran Van Tuyen, who was also president of the Vietnam Bar Association. (Tran Van Tuyen's case has been "adopted" by Amnesty International, and it is feared he may already be dead.) Other imprisoned "third-force" leaders include Bui Tuong Huan, a senator and former president of Hué University, Father Tran Huu Thanh, a dissident Catholic priest who had been a vigorous advocate of social reform under the old government, and Tran Ngoc Chau, once the third-ranking member of the National Assembly who was sentenced to prison in 1969 for alleged Communist affiliation (his brother was a North Vietnamese agent).

These and similar arrests signify the total destruction of political freedom in the country. The many political parties which existed in South Vietnam before the Communist takeover have been disbanded, and elections now serve, as they do in all Communist countries, merely as occasions for intensified propagandizing and for automatic ratification of the candidates put forward by the party. The pretense of free choice is of course maintained. In the elections of April 1976, for example, voters could cross out two of three names on the party list—but even then there was fre-

quently a party official on hand to make sure the preferred candidates were not scratched. If the turnout was high, it was for a simple reason: as Father Gelinas points out, "Your voting card, duly stamped, became your identity card. On election day all the old identity cards became obsolete; and without an identity card you can't buy rice, you are automatically in violation of the law, you can't live. If you didn't vote you were simply a non-citizen."

If political freedom has disappeared under the current regime, so has freedom of the press. There had been twenty-seven daily newspapers, some two hundred scholarly journals, three television stations, and more than twenty radio stations in South Vietnam under the Thieu regime. When the Communists took over, these were all closed down, and replaced by two official dailies, one television channel, and two radio stations—all disseminating the same government propaganda. During the first weeks of the new regime, hundreds of thousands of books, magazines, and records—symbols of the old "decadent" culture—were set on fire in the streets, and all writers and artists in Saigon were required to register with the "Association of Writers and Artists of Ho Chi Minh City" (the new name given to Saigon). In September 1975, the government began arresting intellectuals, and papers recently smuggled out of Vietnam contain the names of forty-eight of the country's most prominent writers and artists who have disappeared in this way.

THE Communist party controls South Vietnamese society at every level. The old labor federation, the CVT, was disbanded immediately by the Communists and many of its leaders were executed or sent to reeducation camps. The new federation is completely a creature of the party, which appoints all its officials. Freedom of movement is now regulated by a system of internal passports, and freedom of association has been abolished altogether. Any kind of large family gathering, such as a wedding or funeral, requires a government permit and is attended by a security officer. Even get-togethers of a few people are viewed suspiciously, so that participants are liable to be picked up for questioning at any time, and, if their reports vary, arrested. There are also daily indoctrination sessions for the general public at which citizens recite the basic tenets of Communism and the evils of U.S. imperialism, and also inform the instructor about what is going on in the neighborhood—a useful way for the authorities to keep track of "counterrevolutionary" behavior. The schools, naturally, are centers for systematic indoctrination, and teachers must check out all materials with the authorities beforehand to make certain they contain the proper ideological content. (Elementary arithmetic, according to one refugee teacher, is

taught through problems like the following: "One Communist soldier kills fifteen American imperialist soldiers and shoots down three imperialist planes in one day. How many soldiers and how many planes will he account for in five days?")

The party has been particularly determined to eliminate religion, the aspect of the "old" culture that the people cling to most tenaciously. All four major religions of South Vietnam—the majority An Quang Buddhists, the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, and the Catholics—have been severely curtailed, and many of their leaders have been arrested. On April 6, 1977, for example, police swooped down on the An Quang Pagoda in a nighttime raid and arrested almost the entire leadership. Last summer, the Venerable Thich Manh Giac, who had been the liaison between the An Quang Buddhists and the government, escaped by boat carrying documents which list innumerable acts of religious repression. These acts include the closing down of the Vanh Hanh Buddhist University and the School for Youth and Social Services, along with thousands of smaller schools, dispensaries, orphanages, and day-care centers, as well as all Buddhist newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses. The Buddhist leader also had with him an introductory "Human Rights Appeal" drafted by the Unified Buddhist Church. The appeal charges that the government,

pursuing the policy of shattering the religious communities in our country, . . . has arrested hundreds of monks, confiscated hundreds of pagodas and converted them to government administration buildings, removed and smashed Buddha and Bodhisattva statues, prohibited celebration of the Buddha's birthday as a national holiday, made it impossible for monks and nuns to support themselves financially, prevented laymen from coming to temples, and forbidden monks to travel and preach by ordering restrictions in the name of "national security."

Along with other members of the resistance movement (which continues, in spite of everything), the Buddhists are finding that the Communists, who had promised national reconciliation and concord, are far more thorough in their repression than any previous government had been. It is also much harder to appeal to world opinion these days than it was before. Thus, while the self-immolation of the Venerable Thich Quang Duc in 1963 received international publicity and shook the foundations of the Diem regime, the self-immolation of *twelve* Buddhist nuns and priests on November 2, 1975, in protest against Communist repression, passed virtually unnoticed. The official Communist version of the event is that "Abbot Hue Hien killed eleven monks and nuns and then burned himself and the monastery."

The population is also suffering economic hardships on a scale unknown before. Several million

people are unemployed, food is scarce, inflation is rampant, a great deal of personal property has been confiscated, and taxes are so high that production is discouraged. Nguyen Cong Hoan claims that this impoverishment of the people is a deliberate Communist policy insofar as it gives the regime added "leverage" over them. But whether the policy is in fact intentional or simply the usual example of totalitarian economic performance, its effect has been to make the population utterly dependent on the government for rice rations, medicine, employment, and other essentials. By withholding these necessities, the government has more easily been able to "persuade" people to resettle in the dreaded New Economic Zones.

These zones are hardly different from the re-education camps. They are located in remote jungle areas where people work in collective gangs at such tasks as clearing land and digging canals. Living conditions are primitive, there is little food, and malaria is rampant. Despite their name, the New Economic Zones do not serve an economic purpose but rather a political one: the deliberate fragmentation of the population in order to root out the last remaining vestiges of the old "bourgeois" order. Anyone considered unproductive or untrustworthy by the new regime is likely to be relocated.

Such unproductive and untrustworthy elements include, according to an article in the official daily *Giai Phong* (March 17, 1977), the unemployed, merchants, property owners, students not in school (usually because they are kept out on grounds of their families' social or political standing), officers and civil servants of the old regime, persons with relatives in reeducation camps, disabled soldiers from the former army, the crippled and the elderly, members of minority groups and religions (the Chinese are mentioned), urban residents who used to live in the countryside, and, finally, skilled workers, technicians, and intellectuals whom the authorities "invite" to register "voluntarily" for the new zones. By the spring of 1977, according to official figures, some 700,000 people had been moved into these new zones. Nevertheless, Premier Pham Van Dong has complained that the resettlement program has been "poorly executed" so far. The regime's ultimate goal is to resettle 10 million people.

IN SHORT, the southern half of Vietnam is now a totalitarian state run from Hanoi, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Vietcong having been liquidated less than three months after the Communist takeover. Clearly a staggering transformation has already taken place. The sense of hopelessness felt by the Vietnamese people in the face of the harsh controls, the random cruelty, and the sheer economic irrationality of their new masters is conveyed in the Buddhist human-rights appeal:

Since the liberation [*sic*] thousands have committed suicide out of despair. Thousands have fled the country in small boats. Hospitals are reserved for cadres; civilians hardly have a chance to be hospitalized in case of sickness, while more than 200 doctors remain in detention. Schoolchildren under fourteen have been assigned to collect pieces of scrap material in big garbage heaps and other places during the summer vacation; this has resulted in numerous explosions of old munitions and the loss of hundreds of lives. The recent accident on June 12, 1977, which killed twenty-five children, is an example. Tens of thousands of war veterans are left without any care. Civilian efforts to help orphans, especially those not in orphanages, have been stopped. Hundreds of thousands of them have been abandoned to the care of relatives who are barely capable of feeding themselves. Farmers who used to cultivate rice for sale have reduced the amount of land under cultivation and are producing enough rice only for their own families, because taxes are high (40 per cent) and what is left is bought by the government with only credit certificates. People without any experience in farming, like teachers and vendors, have been forced to take up the plough. Local irrigation systems have been planned by non-specialists without coordination between areas; the result has been catastrophic: water with high acid content has destroyed a lot of crops. A country that used to export rice has no rice to eat, even though the number of "laborers" has now increased about ten times.

The government, the appeal goes on to say, has "monopolized everything" and is concerned solely "with efforts to strengthen its power." It prohibits "creative thinking and participation of independent groups. Totalitarianism destroys all possibility of genuine national reconciliation and concord." The people want to participate in rebuilding the country, "not as machines but as humans with minds and hearts."

Life in the new Laos is not much different today from life in Vietnam. Since the Communist takeover in 1975, more than 100,000 people—possibly as many as 200,000—have fled Laos across the Mekong River into Thailand, a remarkable figure for a country whose total population is only 3 million. Many of those who fled at the beginning belonged to the professional and commercial elite, but since then the refugees have been mostly peasants and workers. If they do not get killed by border patrols, the poorer ones face a bleak future in the Thai camps (the more affluent can usually make it to France or the United States). But this has not stopped them from fleeing at a rate of 3,000 a month, and they show no desire to return.

Life is harsh in Laos today for all except the party leaders and cadres. The economic situation has worsened since the war as a result of a Thai

blockade and, more significantly, as a result of gross mismanagement by the new regime. Political controls are rigid and often arbitrary, and everyone over the age of fifteen must attend regular indoctrination "seminars." A few thousand people said to be prostitutes, opium addicts, and teenage "hooligans" are interned in relatively mild re-education camps on the "monkey islands" near Vientiane, but much harsher treatment has been accorded some 40-50,000 civil servants and military men of the former regime who have been sent to the forced-labor camps that are scattered throughout the countryside. The sense of siege is further heightened by the presence in Laos of some 25,000 Vietnamese troops, who are there supposedly to combat a few remaining pockets of resistance—in the south from some 1,500 former royalist troops, and in the north and west from Meo tribesmen who ambush trucks and troop convoys and have even shot down a Soviet helicopter. These troops assist Communist insurgencies in Thailand and assure Vietnam's continued hegemony over Laos.

Bad as conditions are in Vietnam and Laos, however, life in these two countries seems almost cheerful compared to what has been happening in Communist Cambodia, now known as Democratic Kampuchea, over the past three years. It is now recognized beyond any serious doubt that a great holocaust has taken place there, and even writers once sympathetic to the Khmer Rouge, like Lacouture and *Le Monde's* Patrice de Beer, have described the Cambodian upheaval as the bloodiest and most extreme revolution in history. It represents, at the very least, the worst crime to have been committed by a government against a people since Hitler's destruction of the Jews.

The savagery began, as is now well known, on April 17, 1975, the day the Communists entered Phnom Penh. Within two days, they had emptied the city of its entire population of 3 million people, sweeping up everyone, including the old and the wounded, and even bedridden hospital patients, into a forced march to the countryside. Anyone who questioned or showed signs of resisting the orders to march was simply shot. The marchers were not given drinking water, food, or medicine—or any shelter against the monsoon rains, the tropical heat, or the bitter cold nights. Old people and children were the first to perish from dehydration, acute dysentery, and exhaustion; laggards were shot after one or two curt warnings, and their bodies left unburied on the side of the road. One Cambodian physician who took part in the forced exodus, Dr. Vann Hay, said later that in the course of the month he spent on different roads and trails before escaping into Vietnam, he "passed the body of a child every 200 yards. Most of them died of gastrointestinal afflictions which cause complete dehydration. . . . Thinking of all the bodies

I saw, plus the sick who came to see me, between twenty and thirty every day, half of whom were not going to live, I figure that between 20,000 and 30,000 people must have died the first month, just in the area described [the route he walked before his escape]."

Within a week of their entrance into Phnom Penh, the Communists had emptied all the other major cities of Cambodia as well. All told, an estimated 4 million people were forced to take to the roads (out of a population of about 7 million). The cities they left behind were sacked—books and documents of every kind were destroyed, temples were ransacked, everything from household furnishings to hospital equipment to automobiles was smashed to pieces or set on fire. In a matter of days, the Communist troops—acting in the name of Angka Loeu, the mysterious, all-powerful Organization on High—had obliterated Cambodian society, destroying everything which could be taken to represent a link with the old order. "More than 2,000 years of Cambodian history," Radio Phnom Penh declared, "have virtually ended." Father Ponchaud quotes a local Communist official as having said that the intention of the new regime was "to do away with every reminder of colonial and imperialist culture, whether visible or tangible or in a person's mind; to rebuild our new Cambodia, one million men is enough."

The first to be executed by the new regime were the military officers and officials of the former Lon Nol government, and their families. According to accounts given by the handful of survivors who managed to escape these massacres, officers of the surrendering army would be assembled in one place, given assurance of fair treatment, and then driven off in full dress uniform to what they were told would be welcoming ceremonies for the exiled Prince Sihanouk. Instead, the officers were taken to a prearranged location in the countryside,

\* Quoted by John Barron in the hearings before the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the House Committee on International Relations, May 3, 1977. Most of the information on what has happened in Cambodia comes from interviews with Cambodian refugees in Thailand and France. The most comprehensive and thorough study, based on interviews with more than 300 refugees, is *Murder of a Gentle Land* by Barron and Anthony Paul (Reader's Digest Press, 240 pp., \$9.95). Another valuable book is *Cambodge: année zero* (Julliard) by François Ponchaud (Holt, Rinehart & Winston is bringing out an English edition, *Cambodia: Year One*, translated by Nancy Amphoux, in July). Ponchaud, a French priest and noted authority on Cambodia, spent ten years in the country before leaving in early May 1975 with the hundreds of other foreigners who had been confined in the French embassy. The information in these books is consistent with the reports of many journalists, notably Sidney H. Schanberg and Henry Kamm of the *New York Times*, and with the views of Charles H. Twining, the American foreign-service officer in Bangkok responsible for following events in Cambodia. Twining's views are contained in testimony before the House Subcommittee mentioned above, July 26, 1977.

where Communist troops were waiting to slaughter them. Often no one remained alive after these massacres to tell the tale, but since the Communists left the bodies unburied—the better to terrorize the populace—many saw the officers' remains. Even a group of eighty-eight air-force pilots who had loyally returned from Thailand to the new "democratic" Cambodia were not spared, but stabbed and clubbed to death following a well-publicized welcoming ceremony at the Thai border.

Some of the more horrifying incidents described in Barron and Paul's *Murder of a Gentle Land* (based upon tape-recorded interviews with refugees who are identified by name) strain one's power of belief, but seem credible in the light of what we know about the present Cambodian regime. At the village of Kauk Lon, for example, some 360 men, women, and children—all the inhabitants of the village—were machine-gunned by Communist troops because some of the men were suspected of being police agents and government officials. Near the village of Khal Kabei, about forty wives and daughters of former military officers and senior civil servants were buried up to their necks in a line, then stabbed in the throat one by one. At Mongkol Borei, ten civil servants and their families, about sixty people in all, were rounded up, and then, with hands tied behind their backs, taken by truck to a banana plantation near the village of Banteay Neang. What happened next is described by Ith Thaim, the man drafted by the Communists to drive the truck:

Weeping, sobbing, begging for their lives, the prisoners were pushed into a clearing among the banana trees, then formed into a ragged line, the terrified mothers and children clustering around each head of the family. With military orderliness, the Communists thrust each official forward one at a time and forced him to kneel between two soldiers armed with bayonet-tipped AK-47 rifles. The soldiers then stabbed the victim simultaneously, one through the chest and the other through the back. Family by family, the Communists pressed the slaughter, moving methodically down the line. As each man lay dying, his anguished, horror-struck wife and children were dragged up to the body. The women, forced to kneel, also received simultaneous bayonet thrusts. The children and babies, last to die, were stabbed where they stood.

A SECOND wave of organized executions began in early 1976. This time it was not only high-ranking figures who were marked for destruction, but also all former government soldiers and civil servants, along with teachers, students, and village chiefs. Just how many people were killed in these massacres may never be known, though close observers have estimated that somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 Cambodians were executed by the Communists during

1975 and 1976. Moreover, these deaths represent only a relatively small proportion—perhaps 10 per cent—of the total number of people who have died at the hands of the Communist regime. An estimated 400,000 perished at the outset in the forced marches, and hundreds of thousands more who survived the marches died later—and are still dying—in the slave-camp "villages" to which they were sent.

In these camps, inmates are assigned to one of three separate work-gangs made up of adult men, adult women, and children between the ages of six and fifteen. (One consequence of this has been the virtual destruction of family life.) The three groups work from six in the morning to six in the evening seven days a week, except on moonlit nights when adults continue working until ten; the rest of the time is taken up with indoctrination sessions. The work consists mostly of digging irrigation ditches, building small dams, clearing trees, and plowing the ground for later rice planting. There are no rest periods and only two breaks for "meals," which consist of half of a small condensed-milk can of rice. In an effort to stay alive, prisoners have resorted to anything that seems edible—the bark of trees, leaves, insects. Nevertheless, death from starvation is extremely common, as is death from disease and by execution. Indeed, virtually any minor deviation from the rigid discipline imposed by village authorities can lead to execution. Flirtation, marital quarreling, talking during the work period, fraternizing outside the family, or any display of what the regime calls "old dandruff" (meaning any show of longing for the old days) may result in a *kosang* (or warning)—no one is allowed more than two *kosangs*. Extramarital sex or attempting to marry without proper authorization lead to summary execution, as does any escape attempt, or any suspicion of harboring a desire to escape.

Not surprisingly, the attrition rate in these camps has been extraordinarily high, particularly for the half-million people from the south who were uprooted for the second time in the autumn of 1975, just a few weeks before they were to harvest the grain they had planted over the summer. One refugee from Krakor, a village located on the road from Phnom Penh to Battambang, reported that the population of his community declined from 12,750 in May 1975 to 6,000 in December 1976 as a result of starvation, disease, and execution. When these figures were announced by the local Communist chief, the announcement came in the form of a pep talk: "Because the population of Krakor is half what it was, you must all work twice as hard now." *Time* magazine recently reported that 250 people a month were dying of starvation in Kok Tlok, a village of 10,000 residents, and U.S. foreign-service officer Charles H. Twining has described a village that lost one-sixth of its population in the course of a year. Barron

and Paul estimate that close to 20 per cent of the survivors of the initial marches—about 700,000 people—died of starvation and disease between May 1975 and January 1977.

We may never know the total number of people who have died in revolutionary Cambodia. Barron and Paul estimate that from April 17, 1975, to January 1, 1977, as a result of all causes combined—the marches, disease and starvation in the camps, executions, and unsuccessful escape attempts—1,200,000 people have died. *Newsweek* recently estimated the number who have died at 2 million. An even higher estimate has been given by Father Ponchaud whose research, according to a recent article by William Shawcross in the *New York Review of Books*, "appears more thorough than any yet undertaken," and who has interviewed more than 1,000 Cambodian refugees. Shawcross quotes Father Ponchaud's latest summary of his work (late February): "The estimate that more than 100,000 Khmers have been executed must now be taken as an absolute minimum. It is possible that two or three times as many people have been executed. The number who have died because of the lack of food and of medical and sanitary facilities, and from the frantic pace of work, may well be more than 2 million. I have had reports of villages in which a third, a half, or even nine-tenths of the population have died." Others have come up with lower figures, like Lewis M. Simons who held in a recent article in the *Washington Post* that the first reports may have been "inflamed by horrifying tales carried by the refugees." But even Simons's estimate places the number of executions alone at 200,000, which is twice the estimate of Barron and Paul, and he goes on to point out "that malnutrition and disease, notably malaria, had taken several times more lives than executions."

The hopes of some observers that the situation might improve, once the regime had consolidated its power, no longer seem warranted. All the evidence indicates that the regime is, if anything, growing more extreme in its policies, not less, and that people are still dying at a monstrous rate. Not long ago, moreover, a new phase got under way, as the revolution began, inevitably, to devour its own children. Thus, according to recent interviews with Khmer Rouge defectors in Thailand, thousands of Communist officers and soldiers have been executed in a purge which began in April of last year, and which may be directed against a faction in the regime suspected of having sympathies with the Vietnamese Communists. The so-called "new" Khmer Rouge has intensified its efforts to seek out and destroy all soldiers and civil servants of the old Lon Nol regime who are still alive, as well as all Buddhist monks and "educated" people (meaning anyone with a seventh-grade education or above). In a speech delivered in late September, Communist party leader Pol Pot said that as many as 1 to 2 per cent of Cambodia's

population are "reactionary elements" and must therefore be eliminated. (Since Pol Pot estimates the population at 8 million—an exaggerated figure—this may mean as many as 160,000 people.) Recent events, however, make it conceivable that the Vietnamese army may conquer the shattered remains of Cambodia before Pol Pot can complete his ghastly revolution. Despite their historic enmity toward Vietnam, and despite the brutality of which the Vietnamese Communists are themselves capable, some Cambodians might even welcome a Vietnamese conquest as a fate preferable to life, and death, under Pol Pot.

AT THIS stage, it seems heartless even to raise the question of whether the Vietnamese (not to mention the Cambodians), are more or less free now than they were before the Communists took over. Freedom is, of course, relative. But even if pre-Communist South Vietnam was obviously less free than, say, the United States, and even if many of the government's political opponents were in prison, the fact remains that the opposition parties were still well enough organized in 1971 to win nearly 40 per cent of the seats in that year's election to the lower house. And people living in pre-Communist South Vietnam could also practice Buddhism, write poetry, or organize unions, without being sent to a concentration camp; nor were they subjected to ceaseless indoctrination. For the Vietnamese, the distinction between a society that is authoritarian or "partly free" (to borrow the Freedom House designation) and one that is totalitarian is not academic. Moreover, the notion that the South Vietnamese have been compensated for their loss of freedom with new economic advantages can hardly be taken seriously, given the fact that the new totalitarian regime has not only wrecked the lives of the people, but has also wrecked the country's economy. The elimination of the middle class and the enslavement of the work force may have helped the party to achieve total power, but they have not proved to be the best methods for promoting economic development.

Save perhaps for the unspeakable barbarism in Cambodia, there is nothing we have now learned about the nature of Communist rule in Indochina that could not have been anticipated during the war. For example, a front-page story in the *New York Times* of August 10, 1972 provided a detailed account of Communist practice during the three-month occupation of Binh-dinh province: "... people who lived through the occupation have told of public executions, groups of people being led away, forced labor, enormously high taxes, stiff controls on everyday travel between hamlets, and mandatory nightly political lectures." Yet only a week after this story appeared, the Democratic party standard-bearer,

George McGovern, could proclaim that when Communists take over a village "they don't assassinate people there. They set up a school and a road system and a tax system."

McGovern's view of Communism as just "another economic system" which people should be allowed to "choose" without our interference was embraced by many opponents of the Vietnam war, even when this meant denying everything we had come to know about Communism. For those who may have forgotten the lessons of the past, or for those who may never have learned them, the recent tragic history of Indochina should be instructive.

THE main lesson to be learned—or relearned—from the new Indochina is that Communism is a system based on terror and total power. It is a system, moreover, which is not content simply to destroy every trace of political opposition, or to subject every aspect of society to the rigid control of the party dictatorship. It also requires the individual to surrender his soul to the state and thereby become a "new man." In this respect, the Cambodian revolution, while singular in its brutality, must still be understood as merely another variant of the Communist totalitarian phenomenon. It is Communism manifesting itself under particular national circumstances. Lacouture suggests, for example, that the long humilia-

tion of colonialism, and particularly the "obsessive proximity" of the more powerful and dominating Vietnamese, might account for "the frantic desire of today's leaders in Cambodia to show themselves to be more radical, puritan, doctrinaire than their neighbors. . . ." But in another sense (as Leo Cherne has pointed out), the Cambodian revolution may be understood as the purest Communism on earth—so pure that it views all other forms of Communist rule as compromises with the goal of reshaping the human personality and building a completely new form of society.

It is true, as was often said during the war, that the Vietnamese Communists, like their Cambodian counterparts, are nationalists. But this does not mean that they have ceased to be Communists. Far from being subordinate to nationalism, and therefore inconsequential, Communism infuses nationalism with millennial purpose and terrifying power—power that can be used to destroy an entire nation, or to attack a neighbor, as the occasion demands. That is why neither the suffering nor the fighting in Indochina stopped when the Communists won the war. And it is also why the time has come to challenge the assumption left over from the anti-war movement that an attitude of benign indifference to the spread of Communism is perfectly acceptable from a moral as well as a political point of view.

## Literature Available from Social Democrats, USA

<b>A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait</b> by Jervis Anderson	\$ 4.45
<b>Communications Workers of America: The Story of a Union</b> by Thomas R. Brooks	10.00
<b>Toil and Trouble: A History of American Labor</b> by Thomas R. Brooks	2.65
<b>The Social Democratic Prospect</b> by Sidney Hook	.50
<b>Good Neighborhood: The Challenge of Open Housing</b> by Morris Milgram	10.00
<b>The Recovery of American Cities</b> by Paul R. Porter	8.95
<b>Sentence to Life: Reflection on Politics, Education and Law</b> by John P. Roche	10.00
<b>Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin</b>	2.95
<b>SD Papers 1: Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy</b> by Sidney Hook, Bayard Rustin, Carl Gershman, Penn Kemble	.50
<b>SD Papers 2: Africa, Soviet Imperialism &amp; the Retreat of American Power</b> by Bayard Rustin and Carl Gershman	.50

## Subscribe to New America

New America, the monthly newspaper of SDUSA, is the voice of social democracy in the United States. It has received national recognition for its extensive in-depth coverage of the labor movement, American politics, and international affairs. Its regular columnists include Bayard Rustin, John P. Roche, Carl Gershman and Thomas R. Brooks.

New America is indispensable for those who are interested in social democracy and want to keep pace with the action on the democratic left in America and worldwide.

### BULK ORDERS

10 - 100 copies - 45¢ each  
Above 100 copies - 40¢ each

Social Democrats, USA  
275 Seventh Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10001

- ☐ I want to join Social Democrats, USA.
- ☐ Please send me further information about Social Democrats, USA.
- ☐ Please send me *New America* for one year at \$8.00 (student rate \$4.00).
- ☐ Please send me the following literature (payment enclosed):

- ☐ I enclose a contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to further the educational work of Social Democrats, USA.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_